

Panoptic Paradoxes:

Control and Captivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the effects that slavery had on the people who lived during that historical period are revealed in vivid detail. We see the impact of captivity on Sethe, a runaway slave, who even free is haunted by two events in her life: that of the slavery from which she must recover, and the infant daughter whom she killed so that she would not be bound in slavery. As Elaine Showalter states, "with the help of her daughter Denver and the women of the community, [Sethe] exorcises *Beloved*, and is able to heal herself" (491-492). I would argue that Sethe is not necessarily the one who is healed, but rather the other inhabitants of the house, chiefly Denver and *Beloved*, who through Sethe have arrived at a specific realization that makes them remember and acknowledge their pasts. The house is an externalized panoptic system that Sethe has created through her own inner conflicts about slavery and the murder of her baby. The family's address, 124, is a place where the characters are controlled by Sethe's projected conflicts. By referencing the panoptic system described in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, I will demonstrate how the ghost, *Beloved*, and Sethe define the "power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (Foucault 205). These relations are not only enacted physically by the ghost, but are evoked by a past that has left the characters scarred, a loss from which they feel they can never recover.

Morrison marks the house "124," a place in which this concept can be easily realized. According to Foucault, the panoptic landscape should have a "strict special partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death" (Foucault 195). The physical form of Foucault's panopticon is based

on “the principal [that] at the periphery, [there is] an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring” (Foucault 200). Morrison’s 124 is an address that not many people come in and out of, especially after Sethe kills her baby, and the house becomes haunted. Morrison’s 124 takes on a control of its own, a “power [that] has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault 202), and the author personifies this power with the opening of each chapter: “124 was spiteful” (Morrison 3), “124 was loud” (Morrison 169), “124 was quiet” (Morrison 239). The narrator’s technique reinforces for the reader the notion that there are forces within the novel which are out of the ordinary. The fact that the house is personified implies that this governing force, which takes on moods of its own, will make its inhabitants submissive. Morrison’s 124 is “a segmented, immobile, frozen space” (Foucault 195), in which “inspection functions ceaselessly” (Foucault 195). The Panopticon is a system in which someone or something is being watched constantly and “power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure” (Foucault 197). This facet of panoptic technology is valuable in explaining the forces, characters, events, inanimate objects, and supernatural phenomenon that comprise a hierarchical power in *Beloved*.

The most noticeable aspect of the panoptic setting is the house itself: 124. The beaten down and decayed imagery that Morrison attributes to 124 reveals the building’s power over its inhabitants: “before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away; before it had become the plaything of spirits and home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house” (Morrison 86). After Sethe runs away from Sweet

Home, the plantation where she was enslaved, the house becomes a place in which slavery and the crime that Sethe committed intersect. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave owners the right to reclaim their runaway slaves, even after slavery was abolished, causes Sethe to become paranoid. She fears that she may have to return to Sweet Home. We only are able to see 124 when it was not a hostile environment in flashbacks, before “124 shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost” (Morrison 89). Sethe’s act of violence, however humane it might seem—to keep her baby from having to return to slavery—is still inhuman and brutal. Infanticide is the worst crime that could be committed by a mother, and Sethe has to live with her guilt that the ghost’s presence represents.

The novel’s ghost, Baby, the supernatural form of Beloved, haunts the house after Sethe kills her daughter, allows a new approach to the panoptic system. Before it became haunted and a place that reflected death, 124 was a tranquil place. It is the panoptic eye that brings change to the characters. Adding the ghost to this system allows two different sets of eyes to govern. The first eye is that of slavery. Schoolmaster is a character who beat Sethe while she was at Sweet Home. He is the reason her back is so scarred. This scarring symbolically reflects the panoptic eye that looks back to Sethe’s time as a slave. Sethe and her husband, Halle, were even watched as they consummated their marriage in a cornfield where they were “scrunched down among the stalks they couldn’t see anything, including the corn tops waving over their heads and visible to everyone else” (Morrison 26). The effects that surveillance had on slaves can be seen as parallel to those that panopticism produces in order to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). One of slavery’s main

goals was to watch the slaves at all times, so that they would believe that they couldn't get away with anything like running away (which Sethe did), and they would become subservient and submissive to the higher power that has complete control over them.

The baby that haunts 124 and its inhabitants is representative of slavery, the eye that watched over Sethe during her time as a slave. She is still trapped in a panoptic system regulated by slavery, (the potential consequences of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1851 that haunt Sethe), but it has manifested into a mental form of Sethe's own creation. Though this panoptic system is one Sethe created, it is nonetheless representative of an external force. Sethe's projection of the baby is a gap that separates her from the rest of the people in 124. This trapping of the internal and external that Sethe finds herself within creates a panoptic paradox: in effect, she is the internal panoptic eye that she is externally submissive to. Sethe has established parameters, which she governs, to try and suppress her past, yet she gives into her memories, because this force finds its emotional source in her and she cannot separate herself from it. The ghost's presence is representative of Sethe's panoptic setup, which "could be a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (Foucault 203).

The mental (and physical) scarring that Sethe received from slavery infects 124: "Sethe and the girl Denver did what they could, and what the house permitted, for her" (Morrison 4). This force, Morrison states, "permits" the characters to act, but not of their own will. This word "permit" echoes back to slavery and panopticism in what it allows and doesn't. The ghost is on the watch, so that it can monitor all actions that occur. Sethe, Denver, Paul D. , even Baby Suggs, have to be submissive to the panoptic force at all times.

The second eye that controls Sethe also derives from an internal conflict that is reflected outwards: the murder of her baby. The ghost is her baby. Thus Sethe is controlled by actions that she set in motion. She tries to move past the violence inflicted upon her, but also past the violence she herself committed. Though Sethe's actions derived from an imposed moral dilemma, the ghost still haunts her. As Showalter notes, "people must be portrayed with interior lives and moral choices for which they accept consequences" (491). The conflict, ensuing from the murder, is personified by the ghost. Sethe has not just one panoptic eye, but two, which intertwine to create an environment in which Sethe becomes the force which acts as "a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (Foucault 205). The power relations between the characters share Sethe as their fulcrum and her panoptic system controls how family members live.

Beloved changes the way panopticism functions in the novel. Beloved appears to control everyone in the family after her arrival, especially Sethe. Like the ghost, Beloved is a part of Sethe. Whereas Baby was the supernatural, unseen governing force, Beloved is a human projection of Sethe's externalized turmoil. When Beloved reminds Sethe of the diamond earrings that she received from Mrs. Garner when she married Halle, it is Sethe's repressed memory resurrected. Sethe tries to tear down the panoptic wall she has built, which has its consequences. Beloved brings to the surface Sethe's repressed memories, but they are not what heals Sethe, but what, in actuality, heal everyone else. The more memories that Beloved resurrects from Sethe's past, the more Sethe is able to acknowledge her past, but it remains something that she may not escape. Beloved serves as a character

not to bring harm, but to make Sethe remember what she was trying to forget, so that the force could stop controlling Sethe and her family.

All the characters in *Beloved* are part of this panoptic system, “a cruel, ingenious cage” (Foucault 205). The panoptic system is an internal force in Sethe, which uses supernatural elements to externalize itself, so that it can control Sethe, as well as her family, in a form outside of her mind. Analyzing this control allows us to discover the motivations behind the actions of the ghost, Beloved, and Sethe, and how these motivations relate to their past. Morrison’s motivations behind composing *Beloved* can be seen panoptically as well. She takes us out of our panoptic systems (which externalize racial issues) and brings them within ourselves again so we can remember the struggles of slavery, and the affects it still has on our society.

Works Cited

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